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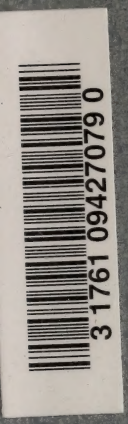

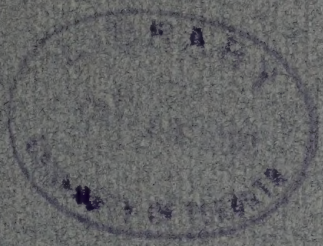

MOUNT EVEREST

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THE NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM, 1922

BY

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SCHOLAR OF LINCOLN COLLEGE

OXFORD · BASIL · BLACKWELL

MD CCCC XXII

MOUNT EVEREST.

Upon a hilltop, looking towards the West,
I sat at evening, and the low sun blessed
With his last light the wet rock under me
And the bent, windy trees; and I could see
Beneath my feet a misty valley spread,
Green round its waters, and beyond the red,
Great, shining hills leant backwards at their ease
Like happy princes, that are home in peace
To rest and smile upon their little towns,
And the long, shining clouds that make them crowns
Were low above them, for there had been rain.
Not one of them stood out from the long chain
Known and a chief, so in the dusk it seemed
As though some higher thing stood up and gleamed
Above their little slopes, and gloried there,
Making a great pavilion in the air,
A scintillant whiteness, scarcely to be known,
The faint moon lit it, and to her alone
It turned its crest, half-seen and desolate
But clear in that pale light, that made a gate
Between two peaks for twenty clustering stars.
Naked it seemed, and scarred with ancient wars
Of wind and thunder into shining vales,
Then high and cut to smoothness, like the sails

Of a great galley, clear against the sky,
That with the wind comes driving valiantly
And runs awhile among the laden foam:
So from the skirts of that white, broken dome,
Like the quick breaking of such rippled seas,
There came to me the murmur of the trees,
Bent with a little wind, and that not cold—
Nor wet with driving rain, but with the old,
Strange warmth of forests, laden with rich flowers
And never stirred by men, nor any powers
But the quick summer lightning and its storms,
Or bright, great lizards, that the sunlight warms
To life, between the shadows of the boughs
To run among the shining leaves and rouse
The slow moths up, or the long, painted flies;
And with that wind came also the faint cries
Of birds that move among those stillnesses . . . . .

What a green wall and garden ground are these
For that high palace of the middle air
That hangs upon the light and triumphs there.
Gilded at sunset, and lit rose at dawn,
With every colour that the sky puts on
For our delight; and how shall he be blessed
That, breaking through these tangles, shall have rest
At last, and peace in that clear solitude,
For all about us that is strained and rude,
With the poor, intricate driving of our life,

There he shall lose, only the noble strife
That is our happiness remain with him—
Or if, perhaps, these shadows shall be dim
Round other wanderers, if in the sweet hours
Lovers shall press between the bending flowers
And come at last like children through the trees
Into the splendour of such silences,
How shall they then run handlocked through the vales,
Or laugh awhile, and tell each other tales,
How on this cliff the wizard castle stood
When Bradamant came riding through the wood
And the sun struck upon her glorious mails.

But this was fancy, not for such delight,
Could men desire the splendour of that height,
But for a stranger glory are they seen
Standing at last above the circled green,
And pass, not warmed by any murmured praise,
By perilous and scarcely thought of ways
To cold and the high snows, and here must lie
How many nights, even exiled from the sky
That they have known; here their great fires shall burn
At evening, when the hunters shall return
With beasts that have not known that men could be,
And here about the firelight, suddenly,
Dusk shall come round them, and a little wind
With the new cold, from where the stars have thinned
With light before the coming of the moon

Shall chill their faces, and about them soon
The Desolation shall spread out, that lies
In insolent whiteness to torment their eyes,
With long sharp knives of shadow in the glens
That make strange, hideous lairs of them, and thence
The falling snows shall make an echoed roar
Like hidden beasts, yet this, with all before,
Shall not weigh on them like the quietness
Of the long night, that still more near shall press,
Desolate, desolate about the fires.

Not lost, and not forgotten, for desires
Have never turned to its unthought-of crest,
Stands the great hill; scarcely can sight take rest
Upon its peaks, and know them in the crown
Of high, familiar glory, looking down
Upon brown hunters at the first of day;
No maiden, looking up the empty way,
Has watched it for the changes of the light,
Still clear upon it in her valley's night,
To know her lover's coming from the fields;
Nor even fear of mystery it yields,
Making wild legends to be worshippèd,
But in its lonely glory it is dead—
Dead, for no death has made its memory clear:
As, in that Northern country, known and dear
The sacred hill that over Loudon stands
Bends his long peak above the sodden lands,

Where on the driven people's psalm-singing
Suddenly swept the horsemen of the King,
Among the marshes in the summer rain;
Or under the blown beeches by that plain
The English spears drove up and were dismayed
Seeing arms glitter in the moving shade
And turned upon the Strathavon* way again.

Oh little hills, that in your shadows keep
Remembrance of our life, and will let leap
From your dark sides small waters, quick and clean,
Veiling their brightness with the falling gean
Where children, leaping on the brown wet stones
Under the bushes where the spring wind moans
Above their laughter, suddenly are blessed
To see red fairies from the islèd West
Run quickly by them through the gilded trees,
Till, starting as the river laps their knees
And turning to the grass, they lose the sight,
And the elves sink into the sinking light,
The memory of such things has made you high
Above strange mountains, in your haughlands lie

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* Pronounced Straiven. Loudon Hill, on the borders of the counties of Lanark and Ayr overlooks the sites of two skirmishes: that of Drumclog, in which the Covenanters defeated some royal troops under Claverhouse (1679) and that of Loudon Hill (1307) in which Robert Bruce drove off the men of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke.

Thoughts of how many wanderers that return
Among the rowans of some nameless burn,
Now exiled of your waters and your flowers;
And in your moorlands still the farther powers—
Fear beyond fear that all the stillness fills
Suddenly in the hollows of the hills—
Wait for too careless travellers, and keep
Inviolate the secret of your sleep:
Even the little plains, the narrow seas
Know your dim peaks, and will rejoice in these,
And travellers, coming by the crowded ways,
Greet your close solitudes and give you praise,
Unmovèd lords that watch the lordless land,
Strange to those Southern countries where there stand
The white-walled cities in their golden plains
Of driven, bright sand, or the blown splendid grains
That bend and shiver under the carved spires,
And make a torch for those quick, changing fires—
The silks and spears of a great company
That from the city gates go slowly by—
Where in the fields the country people sing
And bow themselves, before the Golden King
That goes before them all to take his bride,
And in the midst of his high lords will ride
Above the light of the ranked, ancient mails.

So have they ridden whose very memory fails
About the fire-sides, when the stories go

Of older things than the most learned know,
And in the plains their passing lords were bright
Before at first the horded Ephthalite
Broke through the land and hurled the cities down,
When forests grew where is the King's high town,
And by the river-marshes, strange and high
The marble towers stood up to the still sky
At evening, when the shining host rode in—
With songs beneath the gateways, and the din
Of the struck bells—that now by living streams
Are never washed, nor in the current gleams
The stones of them, sunk in the sodden land;
And where the King's high palace-arches stand,
Some ages since such princes have gone forth
Upon the yellow people of the North,
Clear with their banners, and the rich array
Of their great beasts, along the sounding way
Into the West with the first light, and then
By the sun's setting have driven home again
Before the light of the pursuing fires.
And night falls on them, and remembrance tires;
And Emperors leap strangely to be blessed
With the world's wonder, and how much of rest?
And the gods change; and the new priests go by;
But still unthought upon—too far and high—
The great hill takes the changes of the day,
Throned on conventual peaks, and none can say,
Turned from the welter of sad, changing things,

"This has stood up before the ancient Kings,
And stands, and will be known above the plains
When of my sons' own sons no word remains,
And still my people shall make clear their eyes
Looking upon this glory in the skies
And they shall know its shapes as I have known,
Till with these memories they shall hold my own."

For how shall any worthiness appear
But in the thoughts of men, that still hold dear
Familiar things? As their quick hearts shall burn
To a desire, so shall the glory turn
Of heights and waters and the farthest sky,
But by this measure shall the stars go by—
Not beautiful without the touch of sight,
But made delightful only in delight—
And as a child weeps or is comforted
The winds are judged, or in his deepest bed
The sea is known for an iniquity:
And so to all things not desirèd we
Shall lend no worth, even those that are unseen
Still must remain as though they had not been
(Without our thought) until the light shall come
That leads at last the secret beauty home
Out of the ruins of old palaces:
But the great hill shall never come from these;
Forever round him the cold walls of light
Shall make a sepulchre from human sight,

And easily we, to our own hill's crest,
Turn from the myth that would be Everest.

Yet on his ridges still the slow suns pass,
And from his shining rivers of clear glass
The light is thrown up to his narrow glens,
And breaks from the high slopes again, and thence,
Making a glory in that clearer air,
Crowns and exalts the peaks of silence there.
And while we sink and are no more a name
Still on his summits the eternal flame
Of changing light throws to the sky, that lays
Its glory on him, an unchanged praise;
Above the wind and thunder of the storms
That scar his flanks, still to the sun that warms
A little his pale front, and to the white,
Cold moon that turns to silver all his night
He gives back splendour, and in solitude
Of that remoteness, without change or mood,
Lifts up his glittering peak that no cloud bars,
Content to be companioned with the stars.

Now I looked up and that white mystery,
That over all the hills had seemed to be,
Mixed with the mists of falling night, and broke
To pale, stretched clouds as farther stars awoke,
And as I sat there silent over all,
Gemming my coat, the dew began to fall

That on the grasses put a velvet dress,
And from beneath me in the marsh the call
Of a roused bird came strangely, and the wall
Of the high wood swayed with the winds that press
Upon the hills, and out of quietness
Came up with them the ringing of faint bells,
That swelled upon them, and again was less.
So from the darkened moor I turned at last
Into the valley, and the sunset cast
Its last clear light upon the ways, and still
Lit their long pools. Then even this was past
And the night barred up all, and had made fast
Even the stars with clouds that seemed to fill
The farthest heaven, and govern it, until
From some high farm house above all things else
A light shone out on the familiar hill.

PRINTED AT THE VINCENT WORKS, OXFORD.